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# Partisan path fraught with peril

**W**hite House Communications Director Patrick Buchanan's continuing assaults on Republicans who have failed to support President Ronald Reagan in the Northgate affair may be good tactics. But they do not constitute good strategy.

One does not need to be a mathematical genius to see that, with the Democrats firmly in control of both houses in the 100th Congress, any partisan political cry to rally around the president is doomed to failure: the numbers simply are not there.

Despite the allure of Mr. Buchanan's forthright and feisty position, Mr. Reagan's only hope of putting Northgate quickly and decisively behind him rests on his ability to keep the imbroglio from becoming a partisan political issue. Were he to pursue such a bipartisan strategy, Mr. Reagan would not find himself without supporters among powerful moderates within the Democratic Party.

Sen. Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat who will chair the Armed Services Committee in the 100th Congress, is one of these. He puts his position this way:

"We all have a stake in the credibility of the president, whether we are Democrats or Republicans. I'm hoping that credibility will be restored as quickly as possible."

The president — not Pat Buchanan — ought to be prepared to meet that sort of responsible approach to leadership more than halfway. Republicans, after all, do not enjoy a monopoly over patriotism.

This does not mean that the White House ought to abandon Vice Adm. John Poindexter or Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North to the sharks among the congressional Democrats and the establishment press. Mr. Buchanan was right to point out that the two former members of the National Security Council staff, far from being criminals, have been convicted — or even accused — of nothing.

The approach here ought to be that these are brave and honorable men who did what they thought was wanted by the president and in the national interest of the United States. If in an excess of patriotism and zeal they committed technical violations of the law, that is not the worst thing that can be said of many men in world

Mr. Buchanan's displeasure with Republicans who have been less than forthright in their support of the president in his hour of need is totally understandable. Those who have (to employ Mr. Buchanan's words) "headed for the tall grass" include Sens. David Durenberger of Minnesota, Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas, Richard Lugar of Indiana, Charles McC. Mathias Jr. of Maryland, Alan Simpson of Wyoming, Arlan Specter of Pennsylvania, and Lowell P. Weicker of Connecticut, plus Reps. Silvio O. Conte of Massachusetts, James Leach of Iowa, Trent Lott of Mississippi, and Robert H. Michel of Illinois, and publicists Howard Phillips and Richard Viguerie.

Each is being presented, by the Conservation Action Foundation, a toy lawnmower to assist him in cutting his way out of this same "tall grass."

By the same token, Democrats such as Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, who obviously plan to use Northgate to torpedo Mr. Reagan's Nicaraguan policy, ought to be exposed for playing partisan politics with a national security issue. But Mr. Buchanan is playing Mr. Kennedy's game when he calls for Republican, rather than bipartisan, support of Mr. Reagan.

Whether there should be a wholesale housecleaning of the White House staff and the Cabinet is something only Mr. Reagan can decide. Clearly the president's critics, at a minimum, want the heads of

Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey and White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan. While Mr. Casey has done a good job of rebuilding the CIA from the low estate to which it fell under President Jimmy Carter, neither he nor Mr. Regan would be much missed.

A president is entitled to the "official family" he wants, and feels at home with. But there is something to be said for changing the recipe in an administration's last two years, particularly after an off-year election defeat.

Mr. Reagan's tendency is to keep the same men (and women) around him, without reference to what they bring to his administration. His second-term Cabinet is virtually a carbon copy of his first, and neither — with the exceptions of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Treasury Secretary James Baker — has been particularly distinguished.

New National Security Adviser Frank Carlucci can be counted on to bring some needed fresh blood into the National Security Council. It is just possible that a new White House chief of staff and a revamped Cabinet — without reference to the Northgate affair — might be just what Ronald Reagan needs to restore his presidency to a new level of popularity and vigor in its final two years.

If Mr. Reagan can bring himself to move decisively, ignoring both the censure of his foes and the adulation of his friends, there's still plenty of time to win one more for the Gipper — and for America — in the remaining 24 months of his presidency.

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